Chapter II.

Religion.

The Universe ----- Supernatural Beings ----- Supernatural Elements in Human Beings -----Means of Propitiation.

The Universe

One of the subjects about which Bella Coola philosophers pondered in days of yore, and about which definite information has come down to the present generation, is the universe. The young people, who have absorbed a certain amount of education from the white man, are scornful of the beliefs of their fathers, but it was possible to obtain the following information from a few of the older men and women:--

They say that the earth is circular and flat, like an island. What it rests upon is problematical, though the assumption is that it is water. The world is kept from capsizing by the supernatural being, Sninia, who lives amid the ice in the far north; he grasps a rope to which the earth is fastened, and he keeps it steady by maintaining a tension on the rope to hold the world against his feet. Long, long ago Sninia was seen by human beings, but in later years no one has penetrated to his distant home and the Bella Coola have little regard for him. It was in the distant past, also, that human beings discovered the earth to be round, after certain semi-supernatural men had made a circuit of it. The four corners of space have not the same importance to the Bella Coola as they have, for example, to the Indians of the Plains. It is only through questioning that the investigator learns that the East is regarded as the top of the world; the South is the sun at its zenith; the West is the bottom, and the North is nothing, merely the opposite to the south. These beliefs play little part in the lives of the people.

Above our earth stretches an inverted dome, its edges resting on those of

the ~~earth~~ world. This dome, the sky, is called Sonx^{W}'. If the Bella Coola were strictly logical, one would expect them ~~xxxxxxxxxx either~~ to ~~have~~ conceive the upper surface of Sonx^{W}' as being convex, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx instead~~ on the contrary, it is ~~thought of as~~ considered a flat ~~plane~~ surface, ~~very~~ similar to our own ~~world~~ earth, and no explanation is given of what fills in the spaces between the dome, concave as viewed from this world, and the ~~flat~~ upper ~~world~~ plane which could only rest on the peak of the dome. But logical accuracy is not a Bella Coola characteristic. This flat land is called dä sonx^{W}' dä or wasonx^{W}' waw·tkt·loqosil. ~~This land~~ It is illumined in by a second sun, shining on it as our sun does on the earth. Far in the east of this upper ~~land~~ region are extensive tide-flats. ~~This flat upper~~ The land above is the home of many supernatural beings, who will be described in due course. The relative position of our sun to this ~~land~~ upper world is ill-defined. According to some accounts, it travels by clearly marked trails on the surface, so that a transparent dome is postulated to explain how its light reaches this earth. Other Indians state that it ~~travels~~ moves like a bird through the realms of space between our world and the dome-sky above. On many of these points there is a striking difference of opinion, which the Bella Coola explain by saying that their information is derived from ancient stories, ~~and~~ which are personal possessions, and ~~that~~ no one knows the beliefs of his fellows. A coordinated theology, as Boas points out, (1) has not evolved among the Bella Coola.

The sky, ~~for so~~ as it may be called if the reader will bear in mind that ~~this~~ it is ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ the underside of a flat land, was not always in its present condition. The Bella Coola say that long ago the supreme god instructed his Carpenters (2) to make a sky. They started from the eastern extremity of the earth, but after a considerable part of the dome had been erected, it fell with a thunderous crash, because no supporting posts had been ~~used~~ set up. The part that escaped this calamity is called Sälwalosam. Undiscouraged, ~~they~~ the carpenters continued their work with the assistance of posts and ~~so~~ as built the sky as we see it to-day. Then the posts were taken away.

(1). Page .
(2). See page .

DEPARTMENT OF MINES

CANADA

VICTORIA MEMORIAL MUSEUM

As ~~has been~~ already stated, a sun shines on the land above. As the ~~sun~~ seen by mortals is attached to the land above, so is this upper sun attached to another land above the one of which our sky is the underside. Boas (1) has described this upper land in some detail. The writer questioned a number of Bella Coola on ~~this~~ the subject, but for some time failed to hear even of its existence. At length one man remembered that an Indian who ~~had~~ died some thirty years ~~ago~~ had a personal story connected with it, and later a Kimsquit man was able to furnish definite information. He explained that in his family there was a myth dealing with this matter; others might have heard ~~this myth~~, but since it was not their property, of course they would not be able to impart ~~tell~~ the information contained in it, nor would they necessarily believe it. Consequently, an upper land, superimposed above that which is immediately over our earth, cannot be described as a Bella Coola belief; since it is shared, so far as the writer is aware, by only two families.

The chief feature of this upper world is its distance and unapproachableness. To the supernatural beings living in the land immediately above ours it is a ~~strange and distant~~ far-off place; in fact, their attitude to it corresponds to ~~the attitude~~ that with which mortals regard the land immediately above their own, except that the supernatural ones can visit it when they wish. It is called Nuqwliäls. A sun ~~is said to~~ shines there, ~~and~~ but it is a different kind from that known to mortals. Otherwise, it seems to be regarded as differing little from the land immediately above the earth. Sometimes on a cloudless day the brilliant blue of the zenith appears almost green in its intensity. Under such conditions the effect is one of immense distance, and it is said that what is seen is the underside of Nuqwlials. The ~~presupposition~~ is that the land immediately above our own is transparent.

In addition to these two upper worlds, the Bella Coola know of one, ~~or~~ perhaps two, below. That inhabited by ghosts has already been described, so only its principal features require repetition. It is a land somewhat resembling our own, but unsubstantial and ethereal, ~~with everything reversed.~~ It is considered to be immediately

(1). Page .

DEPARTMENT OF MINES

CANADA

VICTORIA MEMORIAL MUSEUM

The chief feature of this uppermost world is its distance and unapproachableness. To the supernatural beings living in the intermediate land it is a far-off place; in fact, their attitude towards it corresponds to that with which mortals regard the land above their own. The supernatural ones can, when they wish, visit this upper world, which is called Nuqwliäls. A sun shines there, but it is a different kind of sun from that known to mortals. On the whole it appears that this upper sky-land does not differ materially from either the earth or the land immediately above. No human being has ever reached this distant land, so what little is known about it was brought down in the beginning of time by the first people.

In addition to these two upper worlds, the Bella Coola know of one, or perhaps two, below. One of these is inhabited by ghosts[1]. It somewhat resembles the earth, but is unsubstantial and ethereal. It is considered to be immediately beneath the Bella Coola Valley, and the land of the living forms a dome over it corresponding to that of the sky over this world. But everything is reversed. A river flows in the land of ghosts, but it rises in the west instead of the east; when it is warm on this earth it is cold in the land below, when it is sunrise here, it is sunset there. Shamans are believed to have frequently penetrated to this land, and on information from them the Bella Coola base their beliefs.

1. At the present time the Bella Coola are in a state of transition between the old beliefs and the new. This concept is held only by the older people, so it might be more accurate to describe it as one which they, the tribe as a whole, used to know. It has been thought advisable to use the present tense throughout in recording customs and beliefs which are now rapidly passing away.

There is another land beneath the ocean. In this live the fish and sea mammals in human form, as well as other beings to be described in the next section of this chapter. Like all other worlds it has a sun above it,[1] and conditions are said to be similar to those existing on this earth. The Bella Coola are uncertain whether this undersea world is at the same level as the land of ghosts, and whether or not it extends beneath the rivers.

Although Bella Coola concepts regarding the sun and other heavenly bodies will require further consideration, it will be convenient at this point to describe them in outline. The sun is regarded as a heat-radiating ball of such intensity that a human being cannot approach it. Its path, as it crosses the land above, varies from day to day until it reaches its limits at the solstices. As it travels, it is accompanied by the droning of two Aiilaxa, supernatural feminine beings who remain continually, one in the east and one in the west. According to most informants, the ends of the sun's course, though fixed and invariable from year to year, are not marked by any visible means. Others state that at each limit there is the mouth of a snanaq, a mythological animal of enormous size.

The moon is thought likewise to travel[2] each day but is said to be very cold. Few stories are current concerning it, although the Bella Coola say that long ago a man tried to reach it, only to be driven back by the intense cold. A shaman who died not many years ago claimed to have received power from the moon and stated that there were mountains and snow on it. It is commonly stated that the marks on the moon represent a man carrying a bucket.

The stars figure but slightly either in Bella Coola mythology or thought; it is not even known who made them. Two in the Great Bear constellation are

1. One informant stated that our sun served that purpose.
2. The Aii laxa drone as it travels, as they do for the sun.

or Siqulxwaix ~~di~~ di Siut, "The Gathering of the Supernatural Beings."

Sixth moon after the summer solstice: Siemt, "Sits Down", that is, when the sun reaches the solstice.

First moon after the winter solstice: Sxwolemxnam, "What Sweeps Away Food," or Sxlikt, "Angry Moon."

Second moon after the winter solstice: Alonsdimut, "Facing in Both Directions", that is, half the month belongs to winter and half to summer, or ti motis di husäxkäms, "The Potlatch of the husäxkäms." ~~(1)~~ (see page ---)

Third moon after the winter solstice: Siaqam, "When Herrings Spawn." These fish are said to have arrived on the same day of this moon as the winter solstice in the December one.

Fourth moon after the winter solstice: Sikulx, "Time for Making Salmon Weirs."

Fifth moon after the winter solstice: Sinomwak, "Time for Making Hand-Nets for Olachens."

Sixth moon after the winter solstice: Sisäml, "Time for Eating Spring Salmon." It is in this month that the summer solstice occurs.

The chief difficulty experienced by the Bella Coola in computing time rests on the fact that each month is judged by the moon, whereas the main periods of the year depend upon the solstices. One old ~~Indian,~~ man, from whom much of ~~the above~~ this information was obtained, stated that trouble always came at the winter solstice when the ~~xxxxxxx~~ month was divided into two sections. The ~~writer realises that the above information is lacking in coherence,~~ above list obviously incomplete and incoherent, but it was the best available.

(cap) Supernatural Beings.

In any primitive ~~people~~ community, the social, religious, political, and economic aspects of life are so interwoven that they ~~xx~~ cannot be considered as distinct subjects, ~~such~~ as is often the case in more advanced civilizations. This presents difficulties to the investigator in the field, and also makes it no easy task to describe ~~in clear xxxxx~~ the facts so obtained. With many tribes it is possible to deal first with the

(1) ~~See page~~

(This section is not eliminated)

~~1532~~

social life, ~~and~~ later with religion, shamanism, and other associated topics. Such a form of presentation has many advantages and would, if possible, have been followed. ~~by the writer.~~ Unfortunately, ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ the social organization and rank of the Bella Coola largely depend upon their religious beliefs as expressed in their mythology, and an understanding of at least the main features of these is essential. In this chapter the writer has endeavoured to make ~~these~~ them clear, leaving personal relations with the supernatural world and other ~~features~~ points which do not profoundly influence the beliefs ~~of~~ and practices of the whole community for later description.

~~As many all~~ Like other peoples, the Bella Coola differ considerably in the fervour of their religious beliefs. But even when ~~this~~ individual variation is taken into account, the fact remains that to the great majority of ~~the Indians~~ the tribe, religious experiences ~~and beliefs~~ are matters of frequent occurrence and profound importance. The supernatural world is close around them; a sudden thought is caused by the intervention of a supernatural being, the peculiar action of an animal is an occurrence fraught with grave meaning, an unexplained sound always receives a supernatural explanation. The old beliefs still survive even among those members of the community who are nominal Christians, while those who hold to ~~their~~ ancient religion live and have their being in ~~the~~ an atmosphere of the supernatural. The white man, whose scientific training and logical faculties lead him to find a natural explanation for an ~~event~~ incident, is puzzled, ~~and~~ somewhat amused at what he often calls the childish beliefs of the Indian. The Bella Coola, on the other hand, seeing ~~the hand of~~ the supernatural in every untoward event, ~~and~~ considers the attitude of the white man in seeking a natural explanation to be almost irreverent. Psychologically, the mental attitude of the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Bella Coola to the supernatural does not differ vitally from that of the white man under like conditions; but whereas ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ to ~~most~~ white men religious ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ experiences or manifestations are most unusual, ~~very rare,~~ they are ~~of~~ a common ~~experience to~~ occurrence to the ~~Bella Coola.~~ Indian. A native convert, for example, finds no difficulty in understanding the Old Testament, for the frequent manifestations of the supernatural are similar to those to which he has been accustomed.

DEPARTMENT OF MINES

CANADA

VICTORIA MEMORIAL MUSEUM